University of Alberta

Supper elegies and Sunday letters

by

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Canada

to my sisters

Abstract

This manuscript of poetry explores interrelations among grief, place and memory. Drawing on Jan Zwicky's philosophical work in *Wisdom and Metaphor*, I proceed with the assumption that metaphors facilitate a mode of thinking that is substantial on its own terms, even if it does not conform to conventional academic models of rigour. These poems explore the way the mind moves as it comes to terms with loss. In these poems, I have tried to say what I think that moving mind knows—not only about grief, but about itself. This manuscript explores human (from *humus*) being in light of the grief we're capable of, the earth we've come from, where we're going. These poems have been written in conversation with the poetry and/or critical prose of the following writers in particular: Patrick Friesen, Jack Gilbert, Louise Glück, Robert Pogue Harrison, Don McKay, Mary Oliver, and Jan Zwicky.

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"Listening for what comes next" owes a debt to Alex Colville's painting *Coyote and Alders* (1995, acrylic on panel, 68 x 68 cm).

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Foreword: **A House with Windows**

Yellowhead county, late December. I'm a passenger, nose in a book until I notice: we've left the foothills long behind. Now, four-thirty in the afternoon, the sun, a cracked egg, settles into the wicker-ribs of willow, red osier, spills in the white winter grasses, windswept pastures, blur of what was once aspen parkland. Squint and you can see the leaves tremble. This morning, the six of us slid along the ice paths of Maligne Canyon, our fists clamped down on the guardrails. So slick, to descend a hill you had to slide like a child on your butt, pushing with your mittens, or else accept the unplanned gymnastics applied to the body by seemingly random forces—gravity's companions—the leverage of the body's weight swinging from the still point of the fist, the guardrail. Either way, you had to let go, glide on sheer ice.

Plains-dweller, I have a morbid fear of heights. At Maligne Canyon, the approximate distance of descent from the soles of my sliding boots at any given moment to the frozen bed of the Maligne river below is about thirty times the length of my body. On my way down—for this is how I think of it—I would tumble through a limestone canyon, at times no more than two metres wide, that has been carved by violent water to a depth of more than a hundred and fifty feet of rounded chasms, mineral-streaked kettle formations. Undoubtedly, my skull and ribs, one or both femurs, a number of phalanges and internal organs would be pulverized on the way down.

A bloody pulp, but alive, I'd then drown.

Now the highway levels, engine grinds to a comfortable gear and the noise washes out, tires spitting gravel and salt against the van's body. The horizon shrinks to something manageable—a treeline, a log fence, a stretch of road beneath a sky that's

once again the most immense thing in view, and unreachable. Comfortably above us. A landscape that begins with the ground safely a wheel's width beneath me, and proceeds upwards from there.

Acrophobia, or the fear of heights, is considered by some to be one of the 'natural' fears, an animal response to circumstances created by the human drive to overcome our natural limitations. A skyscraper is an unnatural event. The fear a person might feel while looking down through the glass floor of the CN tower is, on this view, evolutionarily justified. Human beings are just not evolved to cope with what should properly be a 'bird's eye view.' Look at what happened to Icarus. Look at the tower of Babel. Even our myths warn us away from these heights. A phobia, by clinical definition, is irrational, abnormal. But for a human being to fear a fall when standing at a terrible height—given the obvious consequences—is not just understandable, it's rational.

Nevertheless, at Maligne Canyon, my companions tease me. You probably have a friend like me—the one who waits at the flat spot in the centre of the bridge, the place where the ice levels off, and clings for dear life to the wooden ballast of the bridge's guardrail, crouching ridiculously to lower the body's centre of gravity, and then, with the upper body reassuringly tangled into the bridge's infrastructure, peeking slightly out from behind the solid wood rail to allow the eyes to travel the gut-sickening distance downwards before quickly jerking the eyes back, averting them, swimming in the inland sea called vertigo.

I admit it's a humorous sight. Likely I'm turning green, and on the trail there's a healthy distance of a foot or two on the other side of the railing. But I defend myself by claiming (I'm such a ridiculous sight that no one can take offence) that the others have no imagination. Really—how else could a person look over the precipice into such an immense depth without losing their balance?

Friedrich Nietzsche, the philosopher known for his existential writings in which the trope of the 'abyss' stands in for the unfaceable reality of the human condition, once wrote: *when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you* (Nietzsche 279). A landscape, like any other external thing or event, can be a mirror.

So I tell myself fear is philosophical. After all, Wittgenstein said astonishment is thinking, and I am nothing if not astonished—by the sheer height of the canyon, the geological immensity of time carved into the rock, the depth to which I could fall.

But I wonder what Nietzsche would think of my knock-kneed stance before an abyss made merely of rock, of stone.

There's wind in the canyon. How can rock and wind form a voice—for they have—that can taunt a body? A body that is actually, if temporarily, alive. How can infinity form a voice with which to taunt that which it encloses? Wind a tongue pushing air into sound against the hard palate of a layer of limestone that's three-hundred and sixty five million years old.

Is it any wonder that a voice that arises under such conditions should petrify its hearer?

Then, from a hundred and fifty feet or more, down, below, the human voices rise. *I think there are people down there.* I experience the voices as vertigo, nausea, as a dislocation such as an astronaut might experience on first being freed from the effects of the earth's gravity. *I think there are people down there walking on the ice of the Maligne river.*

Don't think I miss the overtones, the etymological resonance of the name of the river and of the canyon it has worn into this ancient rock: from Maligne to 'malign' and 'malignant.'

Yes, there are people down there. I think they are laughing.

The reverberation of the human voice against ancient rock could be the most basic form, an analogue, of our brief existence on this planet. A voice that is actually, if temporarily, alive, and therefore, though infinitesimally short in its endurance, is nevertheless, while it is there, profoundly present. Maybe it's this—the profound presence of these voices in this canyon of ancient rock—that has invoked this vertigo, this feeling that though I am standing here on the ground, I am also tumbling the thirty lengths of my body, head over heels, down through an abyss that has depth not just in space but in time. Is it any wonder that being here I think how easy it would be, in the face of all of this, for a foot to slip?

Yellowhead county, approaching Parkland county. The foothills, long behind us. How to explain the sigh let out when I recognize where I am, the feeling that things have shifted, have suddenly become a lot simpler: willow scrub, dry grass, a bit of wind in the

crowns of the aspen, and a stretch of highway that doesn't bend, red pin-pricks of tail-lights stretching ahead of us, and headlights in a parallel stream, brights dimmed for the approach.

After today's sickening heights, the flat land feels restful. I have lived here for almost ten years. In a way, I was born here. Not 'here' precisely—not in this county, not even in this province—but on the prairies, in the midst of agricultural land, the colonized aspen plains. Beside us, a tractor ploughs along its field in a cloud of dust—or is it exhaust? or a low fog in the grass?—whatever it is, it is familiar to me. Whatever it is, it is not thirty-times as tall as me. I think "safe" and "home" even as the yellow diagonal hazard sign depicting a spooked deer flicks in and out of my line of sight and I remember my classmate in university, Lynn, who years later hit a moose driving home to Edmonton one day after substitute teaching in a nearby district and died on impact. Was it this road she travelled? Did she too think "safe" and "home" as she reached closer within the bounds of the familiar?

The root of 'familiar' is, of course, family. My five companions for this drive are all family members, of a sort—my partner Jonathan, his mom, his dad, his sister and her husband Gabriel, who is not from here. For him, this landscape has nothing familiar about it. He comes from the city of Accra, in Ghana, and now lives in Michigan. This is only the third time he has been to see us in Alberta. His family, his familiar, is elsewhere. As mine is: but mine is closer. At the corner of two highways outside a Saskatchewan town barely a six hour drive from here, my dad is buried. Even as we

drive, I can feel the proximity of that land, which I have visited only twice since we left him there, eighteen years ago.

Aside from being the 'in-laws' of the group, Gabriel and I have something else in common. Gabriel's mom died three years ago, of brain cancer that began in the breast. While he was studying for upper level engineering exams, she died on another continent and he didn't know for days that it had happened. This was only a month after my mom had received a terminal diagnosis. Almost seven months later, on July 22, 2003, she too died of brain cancer, the same disease that had killed my father. So the symptoms were familiar.

Sigmund Freud, writing about the uncanny, points out that "The German word *unheimlich* [which translates as 'uncanny'] is obviously the opposite of *heimlich, heimisch*, meaning 'familiar'; 'native,' 'belonging to the home'" (Freud 154). He notes that "we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar" (Ibid.). However, Freud writes, this would be an incomplete conclusion. "*Unheimlich*," he asserts, "is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*" (157).

I was sitting with Mom in a room at the Royal Columbian hospital in New Westminster, BC, when she received her diagnosis. *Multifocal astrocytoma*. A lethal cancer with what medical textbooks call a uniform morbidity.

In other words, no one survives.

There ought to be a word for moments like this, something like *déjà vu*, a word that hints at what happens in the incomprehensible moment. A word for that paradoxical

mix of reactions—recognition of the prognosis and refusal of the verdict—for the sense that the inevitable and the impossible have become the same thing.

As certain unbearable events unfold, though they are unexpected, are a shock in the clinical sense, they are also on some level known, familiar; they arrive escorted by an uncanny recognition: *déjà cru*.

During the eight months that followed Mom's diagnosis, I was struck—and each time it was like being hit—by how much Mom physically resembled Dad, as he had looked—his swollen arms, cheeks—in the grip of this same disease. For the length of her illness, I spent at least a week out of each month with Mom, flying or driving from my own 'home' in Edmonton to be with her. Until she died.

There came a time in this process when the inevitable had taken over so completely from the impossible, the cancer had taken over so completely, that it took the occasional jolt of a physical recognition of how drastically the disease had changed her—this came through seeing a photo of the two of us, taken 'before,' or by running into someone else's mother who I'd known for years and who was still well—to remind me that things might have been otherwise.

I remember thinking during those months—after a while she was almost entirely nonverbal—that things had gotten as bad as they possibly could get. And for her, they had, almost.

When Mom died, I got the call from my sister, who was with her when it happened. Tricia didn't speak, just held the phone to her ear and then passed it to my

uncle who told me, *She's gone*. A familiar voice. I was by myself, at home, sitting out in the garden.

It was a warm July day. The sparrows were noisy. That morning I had gotten a call from one of Mom's nurses who told me she had begun to refuse nourishment, and I had booked a ticket to fly to Vancouver as soon as I could get there.

I can't say what happened when I got that call, the call that said I had missed it, I was too late. When you know what is coming, when you've been waiting for it, dreading it for a long time, there is always a sense of relief that overtakes you when it finally happens. Relief for the smallest moment—and then. Anguish starts small, inside, like a blood clot lodged in your chest. Then the bomb goes off and you spend the rest of your life feeling the aftershock. Even on your better days, knowing how it feels to feel that rupture, when someone you love ceases to be—that follows you everywhere.

So my first urge was to get away. I slipped on my sandals and left the yard. I walked down the sidewalk, one foot after another in the warmth of the sun. I knew where I was going. For weeks now, I'd been hanging over the fence of a lily garden I'd found, trying to make sense of the shape the world was taking. The yard was crammed with lilies of dozens of varieties. I'd never seen so many lilies in one place before. This yard that I had walked past every day since the snow had melted, these lilies I had watched bloom—this was a place I could feel the pain of losing Mom. The life of those lilies—so absolutely beautiful and so absolutely brief.

I went there by instinct. Found my way through eyes I didn't bother to wipe dry. I just let the water build like a lens that made the world look the way it felt: undecipherable. I arrived at the chain link fence, at the words I'd known were coming—

She's gone—and stood there, leaning my elbows on a layer of climbing sweet pea—and wept.

Robert Pogue Harrison, in his book *The Dominion of the Dead,* writes that it is out of the self's "impossible desire to reunite what death has separated that something like the quest for meaning first gets under way" (Harrison 65). From experience, I recognize what he means. I can see it in the way I remember myself as a child, after dad died: a small girl with straight, white-blond hair, the colour of a spent dandelion. A mind too young for serious questions. Silenced by this death, forced back in myself into a space I didn't recognize, a place for considering things I had no words for.

I use the word 'place' advisedly. That interior location was an internalization of a landscape I stared and stared at, trying to will it into explanation. I see myself that first summer after he died, playing—though it might be better characterized as looking, staring—in the grass behind the house. The unplanted garden, the grass still brown from winter—these were my points of entry: I had no proper questions. So I transplanted that yard, the whole thing, even the rusted clothesline and back fence crowded with lilacs, even the lilacs. And there I began to see the world through the grief that stood between me and everything.

One of the things that has entered my life through this manner of looking—a worldview mediated by grief—is an awareness of the way that a landscape can hold a person up, can uphold a life. Literally, this is true, since the ground beneath my feet does not let me fall through. But more than this: it started with that sparsely planted backyard in small-town Saskatchewan. An awareness of being held up.

The lily garden I visited all summer while Mom was dying and that I returned to on the warm July day the world changed allowed me to face the truth of my mother's death. All summer I'd known it was coming, as surely as I knew the lilies' blooms would not make it to winter. If place matters at all for human beings it is at least in part as the external corroboration of what we know will happen, has happened, in our own lives.

Parkland county. Hawks along the highway, their wings sweeping the fields. The outside world moves in, where it gives the mind shape, and form. The landscape as we head home for Edmonton is increasingly familiar—cows out to pasture, a wind-break of poplar, the sky a simple dome that looks like it could be lifted like a lid from the land.

Today at Maligne Canyon, we watched a small grey bird, an American Dipper, feeding in the falls. The dipper eats aquatic insects, finding food by diving down into frigid, often turbulent waters. Flying through waterfalls.

The dipper does not suffer from *acrophobia*. If it did, it would not survive.

"What is a house?" asks Robert Pogue Harrison, offering a twist on the usual question which interrogates the notion of home (Harrison 37). He answers his own question by stating that "the ancient house was first and foremost an institution by which, or *in* which, the dead were lodged and preserved in their being.... A house, in sum, was a place where two realms—one under and the other on the earth—interpenetrated each other" (38-9).

For Harrison, the house is the basic structure of human negotiation with the infinite, built not only to shelter us from the elements and from predation—that is, from

the threat of death—but also to open us up to that threat, to allow us to live in the cross-hairs of protection from harm, on one hand, and awareness of it, on the other.

He asks: "Can we even imagine a house without windows" (39)?

In this country, I have lived in fifteen houses, which have had varying degrees of significance for me; each one is a place-holder for the life, and in some cases death, that took place inside its walls. In that small stucco home in Watson, Saskatchewan, my dad laid down on a brown couch and died. We had only lived there for a year. Sheets still hung over the windows.

Visiting that house this summer, I peered through the living room window and looked into that death. It hung in the room, dangling from the rafters.

And the backyard was the same.

In a poem called "Who's There," the poet Jack Gilbert writes: "This grass will die and this lawn continue. What then/ goes on of the child I was" (Gilbert 55)?

As a landscape persists, it does so in degrees—like a human face persisting over time through immense change, yet still recognizable as the child in the old photo.

As we look out into the world, we find it has not disappeared. A stand of aspen is struck by lightning, another survives only to be cut down a year later to make room for a pasture, a barn. Nevertheless, the world persists—though as the industrial landscape photographer Edward Burtynsky has pointed out, its landscapes are increasingly manufactured. As we near Edmonton, what was once aspen parkland, and is now farmland, gives way to train yards, storage yards, paved lots piled high with concrete

pipes, conduit, rolls of razor wire, heaps of used engine parts, scrap metal, and stacks of mass-produced units, parts, that are unidentifiable now, but will become the building blocks of urban and industrial infrastructure.

Burtynsky describes the subject-matter of his images as "manufactured landscapes" (Pauli 10). Subjects that look post-human, abandoned. He's travelled the world to find them. A red, radioactive-looking sea of nickel tailings across the decimated landscapes of Sudbury, Ontario. Deserted marble quarries in Carrara, Italy and Barre, Vermont. Shipbreaking in Chittagong, Bangladesh.

A friend of mine, Bryan, went to Sri Lanka this summer as part of a team doing Environmental Impact Assessment on rebuilding efforts that have followed in the wake of the asian tsunami. Among the pictures he sent me was a snapshot of an oil barge on dry land, its massive hull driven into the ground. Five kilometres inland, it sat exactly where the wave had dropped it. An absurd place for a barge. The middle of nowhere.

What does it mean to be nowhere? Does it mean to be located outside of any claim for meaning? In the essay that begins his new book *Deactivated West 100*, Don McKay argues for attention to infinity instead of eternity, to wilderness instead of place, as a meditative practice he refers to as "otherwise than place." For McKay, when we think about 'place' we are participating in a colonial act that undermines an appreciation of the brevity and inconsequence of human being on the earth in the light of infinity. Practicing the mindset of 'otherwise than place' can give anonymity back to landscape and minimize human being's colonizing effects on wilderness, or what McKay calls "our tendency to make places into permanent memorials of ourselves" (McKay 25). He

writes: "Otherwise-than-place, oblivion, geologic time: to contemplate any of these is to countenance our own erasures without rage or despair....But I'm under no illusion that we can dwell in that moment or even rest very long in those icy waters" (Ibid.).

To countenance our own erasures without rage or despair.

In February 2004, seven months after Mom died, my partner Jonathan's mom, Sharon, was diagnosed with breast cancer.

We face the brutal, beautiful world and try to say yes.

Mike Davis, in his essay "Dead Cities: A Natural History," chronicles the way that nature reclaims abandoned urban landscapes. This process starts with the ubiquitous dandelion cracking through concrete. Moss is patient; lichen is a virtue. Concrete and steel can be reclaimed—they've got nothing on rock, on nitrogen-fixers, water; soil can happen relatively quickly. The asphalt walking paths, for example, at Strathcona science park—itself a reclaimed landfill east of Edmonton—are being slowly cracked up by the aspen suckers growing underneath them.

This morning, an exceptionally warm Wednesday in December, Sharon climbed down onto the ice of the Maligne river and walked into the canyon with the others, while I stayed behind and waited for them, too scared to go in.

It's been over a year now since she's finished her treatments. She is officially a cancer survivor.

As all six of us in the van are, in our own ways.

Parkland county, approaching Edmonton. We've followed the highway through Evansburg, across the Pembina river, through Entwistle, and Gainford, past the sign that reads "2 km Fallis," past Wabamun, where this past August forty-three cars of a one-hundred and forty car train derailed, spilling more than 750,000 litres of heavy bunker fuel oil into the lake.

Even after the spill had been contained, for weeks globules of oil and tar—a combination of sand and the spilled fuel—including some lumps up to ten metres long appeared floating on the surface of the water or resting on the bottom of the lake.

Local veterinarians volunteered their time to clean and rehabilitate shore-birds and small water mammals affected by the spill.

Many survived.

A necessary condition for disaster, on whatever scale, is that those it affects do not see it coming, or if they do, are powerless to stop it. The pied-billed grebe found dead on the shore of Lake Wabamun might have seen the dense black slick sliding toward it but didn't have an available thought, a set evolutionary response for such a situation, and didn't move.

And so, on Monday, August 4, 2003, less than two weeks after my mother died in an extended care facility in BC, a twelve-year old boy stood on the three hundred and sixty five year old limestone rock carved by a river into the Maligne Canyon and watched his father fall; he saw the disaster happen but couldn't stop it.

Just as, on an ordinary Sunday a little over a year ago, a wave pulled up on a beach in south-east asia and killed 250,000 residents and people on vacation at the end of

an unremarkable year. Did they, at the end, see what was coming? Did the father of the twelve year old boy—did the boy? Did my mother, my father, at the end—did they lean over the wooden banisters of their lives and glimpse the depths to which they could fall?

Robert Pogue Harrison writes: "Thanks to its windows, yet thanks also to its enclosure, a house differentiates the inside from the outside space in such a way that, in and through such differentiation, it creates a relation between interior and exterior whose dynamic field of interpenetration the dwellers inhabit" (Harrison 39).

A house, the realm of the familiar, needs not just walls to protect us from what is out there; it needs windows to show us what we are not wholly protected from, a way of letting the darkness, as well as the light, in.

One of my favorite stories that Mom used to read to me before I could read to myself was called *The Adventures of Silly Billy*. I haven't read the story in a long time, but this is what I remember. In the story, Silly Billy leaves his family to go off into the world to find wisdom. On his way, he finds that many people do not have the wisdom he seeks. He encounters a group of twelve men who are frantic because one of them is lost. They have counted and counted but can only count eleven; they know one of them is missing, but they do not know who.

"You've forgotten to count yourself," Silly Billy tells the man who is counting, and carries on his way.

Further along on his journey, Silly Billy encounters another group of men and women. They are running back and forth, in and out of a dark house, carrying trays of sunlight. They are very discouraged because the light will not stay in the house.

"What will we do?" they ask him. "We work all day but we can't get the light to stay in our house. It's so dark in here!"

In the story, it is Wise William, no longer Silly Billy, who answers: "You can't carry sunlight into a house on trays! Your house needs windows!"

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote that we must affirm "life with all its suffering and terror" (Kaufmann 665). To learn to do so is to let the mind grow familiar, in its habitat, to make room in the walls of the house, to dwell in a house with windows. To look into the terrifying beauty of the world, even if it means balance might be lost.

The quest for meaning is underway: it looks to the outside world—to what is left, to what remains and persists—to find its footing. The lives we've lived—it may seem obvious to say—have really happened. The land is marked with the proof of them, though this is not the limit of what the land teaches.

We look out a window and see the light that defines everything. We see willow scrub, burgundy in the overcast noon, and winter grasses crowding white at their roots, announcing: the world is still here, despite us.

The limestone rock that now forms the Maligne Canyon is three hundred and sixty five million years old.

And we can stand on the edge of the rock and look down.

I.

One thing

It all happened here: enough
to brand the heart. All the first things.
South-east of Saskatoon, past ball-diamonds
of hammered dust, and fields the after-winter hue
of a green too fatigued to promise spring,
in that place I can only now lay claim to,
that only love can now lay claim to,
it had always been enough to save one thing.
All winter, in the cellar with earth walls, my parents
kept the musk of decaying soil in red plastic buckets
that lined the cellar walls.
It had always been enough to last the long winter.

The long-handled shovel, the rusted rake.
When spring came, the wheelbarrow
stood in the garden holding the last
three-eyed potatoes of winter. My parents
cut them up with a spade, planted them
eye-side up in the dust.
Dead leaves and seed pods
scuttled down the sidewalk, letting go
the need to survive: a lesson
we wouldn't learn for some time.

Even the exhausted soil kept giving
the little that it had away. We held on
to the one thing: I'm not sure we called it that
at the time.

1988

That year the stonecrop took over your garden
and I hopped rock to rock, hunting violets you forgot to plant.

Lilacs like a bruise spread through the alley,
mashed their soft mouths through chain link.

I had to pinch the green quick of their limbs
to steal your bouquet.

Once I tucked a dozen gold coins
dandelion dust on my palms—into yours.

You taught me then to find flowers
you smiled, *these are weeds.*

The deceit of their yellow pierced something soft
like bare feet after winter, the shafts of grass that still won't green.

Later, when men brought crimson fists—roses—
I knew where you'd learned your trick, how to hide

the way violets disperse into the rock-shade of lichens.
I know you. You once lived Saskatchewan's summers to the bone.

You grew lilies the colour of bricks.

Home

It's hard to get back there.
Not just this basement of our old house
heated by the Osburn stove
or these triple-paned windows
insulating us against the prairie cold—

not just the carpet-marked knees
of the four-year-old playing
by Dad's carpentry shop,
listening to the drill whiz its
mosquito nose into 2X4's—

not even these usual sounds,
the clatter of plates barely out of the oven
warmed for dinner, or the tin choir of cutlery
in fingers just beginning to learn how
to hold something still—

not the smells that fill the house
not the bread rising
under a towel on top of the fridge

and not my parents
though somehow them,
in themselves,
as accustomed to youth and health
as to apples, in winter.

That habit of mind, especially
is hard to get to.

So small an opening
to get back through—

childhood, the blind
eye of a needle.

Firsts and Lasts

The last summer of my childhood I didn't know what to look for, wasn't told I should spend the days collecting things I might never see again.

So I can still see the way the dust in our unplanted garden looked when it first began to rain, but I've forgotten what Dad's voice sounded like when he said my name.

When I think of that summer, I think of long days spent alone in the yard, in the midst of a longer illness. How my knees took on the imprint of ants, the long grass.

That July was the first time I noticed heat, how it holds you by the neck, the back of the knees, and won't let go. Hot even at night. Cool air a swarm of bees crowding dazed around you.

In the day, a sunburn, a piece of ice to suck. Hum of decayed blooms, of what is left when beauty fails. Blood-stained shirts. A dark room with a fan, and on the table, a tupperware bowl kept within reach.

All summer, Mom rinsed that bowl, which smelled of bile. Dad was up all night, so she was too. For the first and last time, they let us stay by ourselves outside in the camper, so we could sleep. We sat at the fold-out table and ate heat-curled carrot sticks, drank watery fruit juice, cracking the slivers of ice in our teeth.

On a night so hot I got up three times for more ice, Mom took me into the back yard. *Look*, she said. I'd never seen so many stars. She held me to her side, her palm cool on my skin, pointed to the star-covered sky, a map. *Is there anything up there you recognize?*

She showed me the Big Dipper, the sky's bright ladle, and its sister, the Little Dipper. She told me they would be there anytime I looked, those cool bright stars, portioning out a share of light. And then she squeezed my shoulders, drew me back toward the house.

As if it were up to me, after this, to find my own way. That was her tone—one quick lesson, then it's up to you.

Even now, when I see the Big Dipper, it's often a surprise. On a clear night, I think of her, of the summer that stretched into the winter he died, and the summers beyond that. Sometimes the dipper's upside down, sometimes it's not. And I try to remember,

but I can't, the way it looked that first night. The kind of thing a child doesn't think to notice, which way the signs are pointing.

Grief

Shape-shifter. Clever as a crow.
That other body. It had been hidden
in my family for years.
It fell into the groove worn in the waiting-

room floor by Dad's praying feet.
Survival, a decoy. A wooden duck,
painted with the blood
of a first relief.
That ghost could be anywhere.
We find it posing as three
balled-up socks
in Dad's brain. Sewn in
where a scalpel can't reach.
The thief in a game of hide-
and-seek: When the others fall asleep,
it sneaks through the breeze,
steals *home-free*.

Story

The afghan grew knot by knot, a kind of calendar.
Long afternoons, a sofa, slant light through pine needles, a blanket
the colour of the seasons as they pass, prairie wind at the glass.

This is a story of the kind of failure that is most ordinary—
a dream of a future worth having: *four rows yellow,*
four pale green, four the colour of black spruce.

But he grew sick. Enough to lie all day stretched out on that sofa,
the afghan tucked around him, as carefully as it had been made.
Delirious, he pictured their children grown old. So he asked

for the impossible. From the basement, a child dragged the heavy storm door
made of wood splintered by weather. There is a stripe in the blanket
that reveals how much this hurt. The father, no longer able,

a flawed row. His long fever, her afghan tucked around him,
the space heater drawn too close. And so the story goes.
The blanket burned, melted like a skin. After, there was this evidence.

She hid it in the back of the linen closet, with the sheets that smelled of disuse.
Years later, I put it in a box with the last of her things, brought it home,
so I could finger the knots in the yarn, scars of the hidden burn, and think of her.

Before she was a mother, she made this, the blanket stretching over her stomach
as it grew. Late in the afternoon, she hummed a half-remembered tune.
Now the afghan's on my sofa; it's in my living room.

Perspective

A dodge on a dirt road packed with snow, ice,
a child in the back of the car wrapped in the wool blanket
they have kept in the trunk for days as cold as this.
She stares out the backseat window
tries to watch one snowflake as it falls,
but it falls too fast, blurs with the others.
She's heard a rumour she'd like to disprove,
finds it hard to believe anyone's checked.
It doesn't fit with the other evidence.
Hills the same for miles, and the sky.
She's interested in the question of flight,
in the wires strung high for as far as she can see.
She loves to watch them crest and fall.
She's seen how they dip and dart and sag,
like woodpeckers. The child has watched them
for a long time now, watched them leap
from tree to tree—she loves how sad she feels
when no sun touches the bare wood of the poles
in early afternoon, the sky uniformly grey. She thinks,
they are dead trees, trees with no branches, leaves.
This makes her sadder still. She wishes she could tell
how long they've been driving, the only landmark
these constant fences, crows on the posts taking flight.
A long time in the future, twenty years or more,
she'll board a train in a small station, northern BC.
She'll ride alone, beneath the moon. Up all night,
she'll watch the light of the train cut an arc through pristine forest.
Lodgepole pine, white spruce. Snow caught in their limbs.
Land so otherwise untouched, it's like riding through a whisper.
Then cutting through town, seeing the storm-toppled pole,
its wires dragged down, wrapped loose around it
like torn muscles, a strangled beast. The child stares
through her window, the blizzard thick around her now
and the highway nowhere in sight. She wonders
how her dad can drive through it, how he knows
where the road goes. Holds in her mind an amazement
she knows she will soon outgrow.
A faith that is young, incomplete.

Miracles I once learned to perform

one

I'm standing by my mother's grave,
helpless as a fist full of stems.

I didn't expect the ground to be this solid,
thought the fact of her burial would leave the soil
like me—permanently disrupted.

But grass has grown over the mound.
Being here is hard. Leaves me thinking
how relentless life is—to close every wound.
Shouldn't some remain open?

When the people abandoned God
in the wilderness, this was their punishment:
he commanded the earth to open,

then close.

two

I wanted to make myself blind.
This was in grade three. I'd tie a shirt around my eyes
and spin in circles, stumble around the house
until I found a place

I couldn't recognize. Dad was getting ready to die.
The game ended when I'd learned the house so thoroughly
I could find my way entirely by feel.

I remember that disappointment well.

three

The last thing I saw before my eyes failed for good
was the summer fields of Saskatchewan
passing by.

From the backseat of the car, I watched the slack
and tense of the power lines, black wire.

This was my first awareness
of fixed position. I learned to hold myself
exactly still, so that the power lines
passed me.

Black wires slung along the ditch, hot tar.
All that motion going somewhere.

four

Moments passed, years passed. I held my mother in my arms.
And I made myself a fixed point, the haze of her illness
passing by: a train, a wheatfield, a grave.

I tried to keep her head still, to make
the motion disappear. Then, one night,
getting her ready for bed,

I helped her brush her teeth,
tucked her arms into the sleeves of her pyjamas—

and my grasp slipped. She fell back on the bed,
revealing the scar across her belly, a shiny purple line
marking the place where I had first entered the world,

and the skin had still known how to heal.

five

I used to stare at whatever bright source I could find—
the sun, the moon, the bulb beside my sister's bunk.
I wanted to stare down sight,

to find out what would happen
once I turned away.
What would the ordinary world look like now?

Standing by my mother's grave,
helpless as a fist full of stems.

six

I'm still seeking the same answers: a kind of blindness.

Wanting my world to go dark again. Wanting
to feel my way through it, until darkness
becomes known to me.

Somewhere that knowledge gets lost.
Her body, her grave. Waypoints.

They return me to my life.

Bearings

Must be after midnight the world outside the study
window's gone black. A new moon
in disguise, unblinking eye. Twin moths

at the bottom left corner of the screen.
Wings beige like a dead woman's shoes.
Twin moths, beige wings.

They shudder against the screen.
Feel with lash-thin feet for a flaw,
something insecure, a way

to enter the room. Black behind their wings
makes a move for the holes in the screen
too small for moths to slip through.

The woman used to catch them fluttering at the ceiling
with her hands, coax them back into the night
where they belong. Now she's gone— no one here

to flick off the light, return attention
to the absent moon, shudder of wings.
One still light is all they're after

what helps them stay on course.
No one to sit with in the dark tonight,
to watch the stark field of their attraction

go slack. Listen, they have stopped
scurrying across the screen. In the garden,
the white night-blooming moonflower

holds its pale-dish face to the sky.
The moths will find it, pollinate it,
and move on. Twin moths, beige wings.

But what will I do? The moonflower's
silver-white gleaming
will not be enough.

Nor will the moon itself, when it reappears
as a sliver of light, curl of a child's hair
fallen on the kitchen floor.

[stanza break]

Nor will the late summer sun, as it approaches.
Nor in winter, the bare bulb against the house.
Nor any other luminous thing.

Post-op

Your bird-thin skull—cracks where
you have been opened. You are peeled, egg-pale.
Scalp fastened again, face stained opulent with pain.

Each membrane that forms separates us further—
as if you could be lost in your own cells
like ripe battered fruit, trampled underfoot.

When word comes it bites into our chests
like mustard shot, finding its mark
without mussing the plumage.

Just the way death's messengers
should come—mouthing
oaths they do not mean to keep.

Gnosis

I've cut off my hair to knit you a halo—
your skull bald as cold butter, and rings of saturn at your eyes
are new flight-lines, possible lives, pushing their way through to surface.
Air around the skin, sealing it in, the body
a spirit-bag. I can feel this in my lungs: cumbersome,
a life-support, this rig of bones, sac of calcium and blood,
landing like a water balloon on a soft chair, a hospital bed—

Look at your legs, veins hidden there like uncertain straws,
they're nothing against rock or bone or the asphalt of disease.
It's amazing we last as long as we do. I'm not saying
it shouldn't hurt—only that maybe we don't deserve any of it,
not even the bare life we started out with. Look:

if I were trying to break the pretence
of control, I'd be guilty. It's just that yesterday
I said I was okay, when really all I meant was let's delay this
as long as possible: this living up
to what we might betray.

But you don't deserve these invasions, steel pricks
and the prod of industry at your pulse,
or this poem, index of your body's surfaces,
of its malleable mistakes, miscalculations,
this poorly knit halo of your pain,
an accidental reproduction: the machine of the body
once again crucially misfiring.

So we're left to our disbelief:
Our water-bags of bones, cell masses
like dislodged icebergs.

We're left to learn how to bluff
without looking like we're bluffing,
how to hide like the myth in the word *prognosis*
that burn offered to us
in the name of the balm,
knowledge

the lie at its root

that wisdom
is elsewhere.

Saying it

Grief I've sewn you this bouquet of accidents.

Grief your blackbird heart is bare.

Grief the others can't see you. My imaginary friend.

Grief you're the map the years made of her body, showing her where to go.

Grief you retrieve. But you only bring back the living.

Grief you're the place love goes to, to remember its name.

What you own, it isn't yours.

There are so many ways to say it.

There are only so many ways to say it.

Grief, what you came for, it isn't yours.

Palliative

It's the beauty that will get you.
Too much of it. As fine a resting place
for your tired body as sorrow—beauty like the nail
on the roof in the story where the boy slips,
begging the sky to stop his fall. He catches
his sleeve on that nail. *Nevermind,* he says,
This nail has stopped my fall. Like that,
that built-in rescue, beauty
can leave you, hanging where you found it, inches from falling.
I wouldn't even know how to ask for it,
for that accident to happen.
I come here only because I have to,
just to get out of the house.
Shuffling down the sidewalk in my flip-flops,
my unwashed hair—beauty
gets you where it hurts: a perfectly good
side-yard, put entirely to lilies.

Clusters of tiger lilies, their mud-orange
clattering against warbler yellows, and reds as
slick as a hummingbird's wings.
There is more here
than one set of human eyes
should get to register against pale retinas. Painful.
So brief an abundance.

And the gardener must know that.
These lilies like a flag thrown into the air
as if to say: You are not the only one
who carries this. *Lay it down, now. Let it go.*

Someone tends these lilies with love
and affliction—the way nurses tend the dying,
or I stroke Mom's wrist
kiss her taut cheek
having seen enough
of sensible love
to cram each moment until it bursts,
revealing its temporary secret—that pain
is the opened bloom
of beauty,
beauty as its dying,
seen only for what it is.

II.

Philosophical Argument

goes something like this
sunlight across the counter
this shadow of window frame
bent along counter's edge
bent along wall
as if someone
has measured this out
has protracted
the lines
bent
this world
into a shape *I*
can see
you're forgetting there is more to this

yes, there is more than this
than the eyes
can reconvene
in understanding.
And I
am getting ahead
of myself. Someone
has bent the world

the eyes, the understanding.

You nod, bleakly,
agreeing but conceding nothing.
You still want me to define my terms.

Okay. My terms are this
light across the counter,
this sun and shadow of a frame.

And yours?

Return

Signs of what's leaving, bruised apples in the grass, sunflowers out back
thick and stoop-shouldered, despite deep-green stalks strong as wrists.

The man, or woman, you love—is leaving, dust-blue sky, the car
parked in the yard covered in a sheet, last year's leaves.

Over sparse grass, a butterfly, a flame in a cold room, flickers.
The car parked on the lawn beneath a dust-blue sheet. It gathers,

seasons, chokecherries, a severed branch. Hurt dog, a thin whimper: it is time.
A season's shed skin—needle-cloak of pine, scattered birdsong, rabbit fur, leaves.

Time I paid attention. Ball-parks, white chalk in the grass. What we love we know
only as it's leaving. Puddles in the pavement, the sunflowers' drooped heads—

they've given up on us, on *this time around things are gonna be*
different. Grey sidewalks wet with rain nothing ever solid nothing breaks.

Boughs as old as the house, apples the colour of a child's cold cheek.
What has turned away now goes swiftly in the other direction.

Blade of winter. A pale throat, air the colour of vanished birds.
The blush of arrival, of *it is time*. There is no going back.

What reaches forward, always longing—its demands will not be met.
Too late we recognize our ordinary hearts, the afternoon's long shadow,

a blue jay's tracks in first snow. Nostalgia's too late, comes
with arms bare wanting what's gone. Wind and dead

leaves, ash, smoke. Not even if we'd known.

Living the life of contemplation

I'm not saying that it's easy: across parched lips, brush
clean water, the temperature of the room. Not to drink.
Only so you will remember, *that this is thirst.*
For sustenance, take the memory of youth
stretching its limbs, heron-thin.
Empty your heart, its aversion to grow.

Balance the twin weights—to see
is to betray. Remember: there is no shared
language. But you will find yourself in silence.
That you must first learn how to love. Dust-streaked
glass washed by late-May sun. If you take
no pleasure in this life. If you lose the will to wonder—
maybe she's lost something so dear to her.

Look, I've considered this with my life, we don't have geologic time.
How can I sift the pale dust of this earth without looking
for the life I came in by? You reply, that it isn't here.
That it was never *here*. You are resolute: *Even if I drink*
from that cup (even if wisdom exists)
it is only to prolong hunger.

You can't divide water with a knife

The North Thompson river
west of Valemount, in the place of its birth
is ancient as the rock that cradles it.
But it is also young, as young as this rain.
This river began as a bead of sweat
formed in the collarbone hollow
of the Rockies—as relief, warm from its birth,
a praise song of rain and moss,
a pool of light that would soon
pull south, building muscle;
now it ligaments the high country—
desert scrub, cactus, dry rock—
it praises the cracked ribs of the land
with the moisture of its body.

But here, in the place of its birth,
ancient as the rock that cradles it,
it is also young, as young as this rain.
Each day it not only begins, but disappears,
leaving along the same valley as the highway.
Watching, you can feel it turn its back and walk away
like the friend you last saw at an airport departure gate
and never saw again, though a year later
she got off a different plane
and said hello; so the river is always becoming
something else, something both familiar
and unknown: a copious leaving.
What you recognize is no part of it.
The river comes and goes;
it empties into rain,
and other rivers.

Longing

45 degree angle.
White spruce where the bank's been eroded.
It juts forward, like a sprinter waiting for the gun to go off.

It's anchored tip to sun by guy wire. Pulled from the ground it might fall to.
Through the mixed-wood, hear the call of the bird *telos,* that sings, *not yet*.

This ravine is any-day ready to give up on roots. That's middle-age, where we're going.

Sooner than you think. This is vertigo.
White spruce on the creekbank. Scoliosis of trunk, sagging waist.
Pulled to the creek by the weight
of its echo.

This is *eros*, the love
that equivocates,

I will wait,
but I will not wait

for long.

Phase change

Admitting the season might be over is one way
of facing up to grief,
of seeing the work that must be done,
the overgrown hedge or elbow-high weeds
accumulated behind the shed
like armoured warriors—you were hoping
the snow would knock them down,
demoralize them, that maybe by spring they'd be
compost, the mulch of productive hibernation, like
your dreams, but—

Instead: each time the year shifts its weight
from one foot to another you feel
the effort, tug of cold at the joints
and the wind with its empty rooms, insisting.
Its needy blue hands always reaching
beneath your coat
asking for something you can't give,
like for you to take it in—into your home

where it can warm up
have a bowl of soup
sit around the fire with you
arms around your shoulders
whispering, *what were you thinking*
with your dreams and your overgrown
weeds? Don't you know it will be like this
again next year?

So you stay up all night the first night it snows
plotting how you'll make it through the equinox.
How are you going to keep that crack from opening
from making room for the wind
with its prying hands, which by now
are getting too close to the very thing—

Your heart like the rain barrel
you found split open last year
when the rain inside it froze.

River

A gutter, a place for run-off when the land is full.
A form of patience. A way of taking it when the rain won't stop.
A kind of mother. The river, when I saw it, was dragging several uprooted trees.
My mother could take hatred and make it forgiveness.
I never considered precipitates, the fallout of conversions like this.
River something you take for granted, a milky green
muscle, a mentality—strength not for the sake
of glory, but for the sake of being ready.
The kind of strength that could carry away a city
just by slowly overflowing its banks, filling up
with what surrounds it. My mother was like this, a reservoir;
she swallowed pain like a river bank in a flash flood,
swelled with it; one day, she exceeded her body.
It is important to remember that it hurt.
That a river tears itself on what it touches,
that this is what it is to be a river.

It would be easier if I could forget,
if the river, the slow gull-cry
of what will happen next—

if the sound of river, stones.

Why the question matters

Because of how things get lost. This ontological problem. Things disappear.

This has happened more than once: out at Ministik Lake taking pictures, you lost the tripod's plastic foot, spent an hour searching the untouched snow where it fell, not wanting to believe something could just vanish. Even that night, after supper, your headache, the question, *maybe if I go back tomorrow, it will still be there*. Later that month you went north, and I lost the moon: blood moon eclipse. I spent an hour with my ear pressed against the stove trying to focus, to balance the scope on my knee. I saw just enough to make out the moon, a white sheet washed with blood, blood like my father's, opening in water, a sheet unfurling.

Things disappear. Socks, the bottom of a tripod, a father's ghost. Match them up to the dry beds of vanished lakes, or holes the settlers' houses fell into, a tipi's stone circle like the bones of a starved animal. This is the opposite of a miracle, that bending of physical law to make well. This is the freshwater spring that held for eighty years and one day vanished, leaving only dust-bowl prairie, prickly pear in short bloom.

This is the god loss, wondering how much can be taken away—a god who gave us the hard prairie to test sanity as an idea, to show us how far it goes. Reason, being rational, fails to explain this. We are ontological animals. We lose what we love—

but not only what we love. What we love we fail to explain.

III.

Listening for what comes next

It isn't winter now, carving that empty space
into my lungs and the alders' bare branches. Along the barbed wire fence
that stretches, post and wire, out to where the lake used to begin, before the drought—
half a dozen marsh hawks sit in profile, one every fifty or a hundred meters for as far as
you can see
letting dusk weigh in increments over the fields.
They are most at home here. I can't explain it.
The light suits the task. It's a harsh life and the light
sharpens each edge—the fence, the hawk's brow.
These things take time to distinguish.

Last year's grasses. Sedges in a field of reeds. Over there, near the bale
of barbed wire, the slack air tenses like a muscle around a wound:
flinches. A brown vole or fieldmouse, something plain
and daily, a slight stirring I notice only because the marsh hawk
notices. The closest one to me. Its beak
a thin blade in the light as it goes down.

It swoops low over the dust and stubble of the field,
brushes the mirror clean with its wings.

Now across the horizon, a warm, imperative breath: *Thaw*.
That's what's carved this space into my lungs and the alders'
bare branches, what's got me listening for what comes next:
the flat, rattled, wood-wind notes of migrating cranes.
Snow geese whose broken shadows
decorate the fallen beams of the farmhouse as they fly over.

They're calling out to the place where their own voices break—and return,
ricochet off the bird blind with its corrugated roof.

Beneath God's agridome of sky, the prairie,
in its insignificance lies still—

a fieldmouse beneath the listening ear.

Prairie sky, a letter home
written somewhere else late one Sunday afternoon
but never sent. That absence. The long fields.

Leaving, you pass a calvary of telephone poles,
dead trees. Hawks in their crowns.
Stop the car. Put your ear to the ground.

The fields aren't empty; they're full of what listens.

Inside the bird blind, its rough shelf open to the lake—

an old record plays to the empty fields. A music ragged but precise,
part symphony of birds with torn feathers—part *a capella* song
of the coyote with its scabbed, pus-ridden shoulder,
old gnawed quills in its hip—and part hum
of low grasses, wind, drawn breath.

This music, tensile, thinned and cooled into
a certain shape will be winter.

Hawks fly close to the beating
heart of the marsh, which is this-close-to-silence,
spare, like light on bare thorns.

Behind us, red alder thatch cradles the day's
last rim of cold light. Branches give way to sky
as if thinned with a stiff rake—

and so nothing grows, beyond a certain point.

Soon the alder, like a basket of pitch and reeds, will allow
no light to get through. To squint into that cross-hatched mat of bare
twigs—alder scrub, dead willow—
is to watch the light glint like a knife and lie still.

Whatever is out there,
it is getting harder to see;
it is harder and harder to say.

The braid of knotted wire sags, drooping in half-circles down the field.
Music from the old record goes on; it's been overplayed.
Now it's thin as a stripped tire.

A broadcast of ducks carries the music down the field
to where snow geese take up its eager,
penitent squawking:

What is there in this world to turn away from?

That old record is still playing, its notes
hover, a hawk over the field.

A red-winged blackbird in the reeds
has caught its throat on a nail, its song
snagged there—

if you hear it, if your heart can be a wire
carrying the song of what-can't-be-said—

(Beaverhill Lake, Alberta)

Dusk notes

On the gravel road
by the farmer's flooded field
we share a supper of torn bread, havarti,
pour black coffee from our thermos.
Hundreds of ducks in the farmer's field—
mergansers, goldeneye, mallards.
A muskrat swims by,
cutting a wake in the still water.

From the end of the gravel road,
the sound rolls toward us: three guys on quads
waving, kicking up dust as they pass.
Hundreds of ducks in the farmer's field—
canvasbacks, buffleheads, redheads, more mallards.
They all rattle loose, like stones,
their wings and voices, scattering.

We sit by the temporarily flooded,
now empty field and eat our bread.
The sun, a blazing treeline on the horizon

dazzles us, and disappears.

Bare posts, barbed wire

Meadowlark: Why sing so?
Why riff so low, so long
over slow
land and the horses'
hung heads?
Why preen
for old mares,
dug in to the chin
in feed, their pale muzzles
stuck in the fence-long trough,
nearly lost?

Why dote on the closed old road?

To say nothing of us,

tethered by our necks
to an extra set of eyes.

We're crouched near the shit-pile,
wondering coyote or dog—

when meadowlark flashes through the air beside us.

The knife-in-the-sun
song, flash and plumage
of its notes, its tumble-
weed throat—

We adjust
but imperfectly;

whatever it is we think we see,
still darting in and
out of focus.

Notes on the photographs

i.

On the road in, the floating houses
in the Ladner dock.

This is where we stopped to take a panoramic.
A field of pumpkins, each one suckered like a pregnant belly
to its plant. Frost on the orange-leathered skin.

This one's taken farther down the road.
The man in work-gloves was about to open his fruit stand for the day.

I took this one as he got out of his pickup

and this one
through the dust out the back window
holding the shutter down
until he disappeared.

ii.

But I should tell you, the pictures don't get it right.

There are things they don't describe about that day—
how it was the last time I stood innocent
of my own death—
how all things
were taken by us
as obvious.
Examples of the world's
persistence, of what requires no proof.

iii.

That day we saw the goshawk first
by its effects on shore, the scattered birds
a chaos we chose to see
as beauty, but forgot to document—
the sandpipers scrabbling through air
wings a white fit a sudden rage
the notes lost, wings like rippling water—

This one I think of as the other side [no stanza break]

of the attempt to stay alive:

a choreographed
panic, that can be looked at and judged

beautiful: a winged glistening
lovely enough, but with an afterimage

of the weaker one, the one slowest to rise
who gets caught
in the claws of the goshawk,
its body limp as a field.

iv.

And here's the moment when the sandpipers' wings
glimmered like nickels in the sun as the goshawk
returned and I saw what persists
is behaviour, nothing more.

The birds moved as one, forgetting themselves.
And their existence, proof, that this was the best way.

v.

So I put my camera down and tried to understand
this evolution—

how fear, the single body of a hundred birds—

how fear
became a tray to catch the light and keep
the predator blinded.

Signposts

The North Thompson river runs along the highway, along a road blasted
into a flank of rock. Heading back as nearly as it can to where it came from.
At one end of the road is home—at the other, the peaks of the hills, receding into cloud.

Yesterday at the beach, five times I saw a cormorant fishing along shore.
Each time thinking it was the same bird.
Thinking I knew enough by now
to make this kind of guess.
Then seeing two at a time,
one in the air, one in the water.

The opposite of the heart

The heart's not interested
in facts; when love dies,
it wants no autopsy—

only a slow rendition of its grief
played to it, again and again,
a favorite record.

The heart knows
what the heart
wants,

    a song of its own
    loss,

not the score,
but the music.

Things that are small

i.

Canola flowers, bloomed flax.
Moments still enough to feel a pulse.
Prayer that is the steam, smoke, the scent
of our desires, wafting up. Afternoon walks.
The gull in the alley I thought was a child crying,
loss, loss. Seeds the squirrel peels from spruce cones
or nuts the blue jay stows in the ditch, wild grass.
All hiding places, incremental changes.

That moment in the evening when we have settled into our lives.
Suppertime, a glass of milk and a warmed plate, my place
at the table, next to yours. The first approach of winter.

ii.

Time, which passes. Heavy rain hiccoughs like a crow outside my window.
A first star appears in the swollen sky as the tine-tip
of a fork, smallest point of light—

Therefore, this mind, all insights,
are small—leaves in the wind,
stirring up sadness,

human sadness.
The love of what passes.
Light of a dead star fills the spent fields.

July heat

Today a sunshower. Your red workshirt left on the arm
of our adirondack chair out on the weathered deck.
Soaked and soaked by the rain.
Old splintered wood needs a new coat of paint.
The lawn, faded with drought, absorbs
the air's sudden moisture.
Rainwater collects in a glass, and evaporates.
Sun rinses the sky until it's blue again,
rinses it like a stained blouse at the kitchen sink.
Later, I watch a bird fly straight toward me,
smack its beak on the kitchen window.
It wanted to inspect the pink and white peonies
that stand on my kitchen table in a blue vase.
The ceiling fan tugs at their petals. Warm mist
streaks the glass. From the south, just before dusk
crows start to fly toward their rookery for the night.
Clouds pull across the sky, blue and heavy with shadow.
The adirondack chair on the deck is empty.

IV.

How grief walks when it walks with us

When, instead of healing, grief
hands us what is already nothing—
a broken wasp's nest,
its grey hemispheres scattered in the grass,
or the scrap of a wing, a white admiral's,
clinging to brome—
when we are given little but ourselves,
in full armour—
then, just as you and I gathered rosehips
after first frost, I gather together
the dried ends of courage,
pin them to a grey-winged ghost, a gull,
lose them in a buckle of wind, dry leaves.

The days fill with a weight like packed snow
and I walk until I find what shouldn't matter,
that it does. Sidewalks grow wet with the breath-
before-rain, and the sparrow I can't forget is once again
strangled in the shrub, its featherless throat—
stretched skin on twig—translucent, pale-apple green.
I count the filament veins
that crowd its newborn skull,
its skull the weight it hangs by,
eyes still closed.

Beside the fence, a boy walks by himself.
He reminds me of the way grief walks
when it walks with us, not looking up.
When the lily garden fades, as it always does
this time of year, he alone is not surprised.
He has learned not to accept
kindness from strangers.

Green heart of day

Light twists the green heart out of the day
and things grow up wrinkled on our front lawn.

In the weeks I've been gone, the ash and lilac, honeysuckle, clematis,
the hedge around our yard—they've all leapt a foot forward while I wasn't looking.

Like a child playing frozen tag, trying to get closer to a teammate
who might free him—light aches the source. Puts things clean.

How part way through June leaves come creased and compromised
like kleenexes pulled crumpled from a purse at church.

That light, how it lands on things no one else would notice—
your arm hooked through my elbow, wriggling

as you try to scratch an eyebrow.
We haven't walked that way in months.

Past a baseball cap in the alley covered in dust,
which you crane your neck to see as we go past.

You thought it was a pigeon. I stop,
point out a robin with a worm in its yellow beak.

The old greyhound wanders around outside its yard.
The one that turns its eyes to yours, and looks away.

Stages of blooming

The tulips I gave her drank entire pitchers of water
through their stems
before hanging limp beside her.

*

Petals on the bedside table
pink and black,
a wildcat's iris.

*

Her skin, a smell of crushed leaves,
freckled shoulder with the mole dug out.
Tubes from her IV made escapeless

mazes in the air.
A distraction, somewhere to get lost.

*

I should have seen this coming.
A road blasted out of rock, a granite shoulder.

Breasts limp beneath the paper gown.

*

Their first naked appearance
changed things. The sickness hunkered down.

*

Bare breasts, smooth and sick seal pups.

I should have seen this coming. Blooming

like light bulb glass, an aneurysm
in the mountain air. Cold sky.

*

[section break]

Somewhere else,
places where wildflowers,
still blooming, instead of cut stems.

*

Where the glacier goes each spring to begin
vanishing—

if there were heartbreak
on its way

there should have been a sign.

Compline

Tonight each member of the choir
held against her robes
a single candle.

Driving home, I'm mindful of that
flickering, so familiar,
that light that keeps trying to go out on us.
Rows of people on the sidewalks.
Lined up like teenagers, refugees.
Some sit alone, on a bus bench, a shop step.
In the car, I can still summon the smell
of the incense in the church,
its billowing grey body, that metaphor
for prayer, rising into the rafters.
On the corner, a woman wears a gold belt
against black silk. She lights her cigarette
with a single match, cupping the flame.
Beside her, a man sprawls against his shopping cart.
Someone in his twenties, a boy, accepts
a gift from the hand of another man
who sits in the piss-soaked street.
Smoke hovering above the ground
is an illusion of fog and the streetlights.

Hastings street

Washed in the orange glow of the streetlights.
At the intersection, we sit in the car, waiting for the light to change.
Looking out at the rain-heaped bodies on the sidewalks.
You wouldn't believe me if I told you that this could be me.
Listen: there was once a man with grey eyes and a yellow beard.
I would like to say I knew him, but there were hundreds of people.
You would never believe me if I told you. Once,
in the back of a van, I touched the wrist of the girl I was and let her go.
She came here looking as we all do, looking for a bearable life.
For a way to strike the match of her heart into flame.
But not finding it.
Finding instead the used-up bodies.
The sidewalks littered with people she could never love.
For so long, looking past them.
Then one day, from inside a car, seeing something else
something huddled near the shoulder
of a woman who was passed out drunk
or asleep, or trying to keep warm.
Knowing what it was, afraid to open that door.

Background Music

I.

A clipped leg of lilac opens its buds—
our kitchen window, glass of water.

Desire has no name but this: whimper of nearness.
My shepherd in the valley, chasing a small, catchless animal.

When snow falls in April, masking our urge to rush back—
we fear what we give, and long for.

One hundred years before us, Nietzsche wrote: *when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.*

The wind has a lash, ice shard at its tip. What breaks
is not temperature but sense, this physical law.

The percussionist wind lifts the grey rattles,
last year's leaves.

II.

Lake water, single stone: This is us.
Cradled on this shoulder of sand.

You ask me do I know what will fill us, the void,
our prayers left behind.

Along the creek: a hip of ice,
worn, osteoporotic.

Snow falling on snow.
Rain, raining on rain.

We mistake ourselves simply for the ripples
skipping over stone's liquid mirror.

I think I will preserve the tiny print, our daughter's
shattered wrist. Her palm, a pressed violet.

III.

The phone is off the hook. The coffee
has become hot tar in the bottom of the pot.

In the alley, dandelions gone to seed.
Their white globes like perfect atoms.

At the heart of an injury, the knowledge: not that this
was deserved, but that is was not undeserved.

Dreaming, I practice the news of the others' deaths, too.
Grieving, while there is still time.

An oil leak in the carport, the stain
slick and beautiful, like a seal.

IV.

Moonlight; the halo of an agony
held over, just in case.

Redemption must be more than this
quiet hour, its basket of shy gifts.

Stroke

Such a tender word for the way death enters.

*

They put bobby pins in your hair, the fine grey strands
twisted into curls. Your forehead still as paper so
you couldn't open your eyes.
I sat like a tame bird on the edge of a dead
instinct. Granddaughter, say a prayer.
Say a thousand times the words for goodbye, for a breath
that won't leave the body.

Waiting beside your bed. Though you were old and therefore
this was natural. I wanted to ease into those sheets
and trade the shroud of my life for yours.

*

And then the day I no longer wanted

to leave or stir at the sight of your breath as if
someday again you might open
see me with eyes that say distance
is more than time without wings, is the unanswered
calling, long hallways, the message to wait—
to always keep waiting. This is longing undressed,
bathed, groomed and set out as one who is not only
anxious but ready.

*

I tucked my finger
inside the curved claw of your hand. Knowing this hard
form always grows out of something soft,
pliable as an infant, whose fat-handed grabs
are gestures
of a finity we can't answer, or retain.

V.

Remembrance of the body

> By the late twelfth century, Master Nicolaus summarized well the qualities of the lung: it was built to "withstand the warmth of the heart" -Paula Findlen, Stanford University

Five weeks with a cough so deep every muscle aches as if the ribs have been cracked—

Even what the cage of the ribs held in's escaped—this apparition in the glass, not mine but my mother's—dry lips, swollen cheeks—a ghost in an old movie, double-exposed—

or an overlay of anatomy—a layer that shows we're both here, so I could say, *this is what our face looks like sick. This is how it looks to brush our teeth, growing old.*

This face I thought was mine becoming something else, a mark of ancestry, a glyph on stone, the proof—

of where the bones come from, where they go. Has this ever happened to you?

There's a story of a young man who held the memory of his dead slung over a shoulder—like a canvas pack. There was a palpable weight.

The body ages and turns away, looking for the path back out.

Needing an older remedy—mother here too—a hot stone at the foot of the bed to keep us warm. Remembrance of the body, where it came from—*rock, lichen, moss*—a poultice on the chest to draw the spirits out.

Singing in the spirit

During the rain, she sits on the mat inside the screen door, listening to the raindrops moderate. Their shifting music. She listens until she can hear different sections of the orchestra, each by its own surfaces—the rooftops, eavestroughs, the sewer section, the cars with their tires uselessly grinding the water. Just when she thinks the music can't get any louder, a low cloud empties itself onto a patch of grass behind her neighbour's house, filling a hole where the silence had been waiting for her, waiting to tell her something she needed to know. Now she'll never hear it. Instead, she hears the streetlamp click on and off according to its timed circuit, washing the road the cars and the rain in a pale orange light. Sometimes, what is there on the other side of the screen becomes too much for her. When this happens—it has happened before—when the rain leaps back a foot above the pavement, demonstrating its lack of height, how utterly fallen it has become—when the street is converted to a small river—when the knowledge of what can be washed away—of what can't—when the music stops and starts and the rain continues—she puts her hands around her head the way you might hold the head of someone you love, who is very sick. She sings to it, sings in the spirit, the rain's music. Holds it like a gentle thing, a bird, something she could lose, something that could be broken or lost too easily.

The song of the spirit drawing near to the body

The smell of the rain through the screen and through the dust of the screen. And after, the smell of it lingering outside near the brick of the house, in the garden with its soaked flowers. She'd been waiting for this storm to come. Waiting without knowing that this was what she was doing. Thinking she was stirring the pot of soup on the stove. With the long spoon waiting for the green halves of peas to give up their shape. But then the rain came, thunder like a jaw letting go. She ran out into the street and it slipped past her, went right up to the front door of the house. On its way, splashing her feet in their plain sandals. Getting at the places between the toes where the dust had been. After, the smell of the rain in her hair. She woke to the metal taste on her tongue, the disappointing sound of a storm that has died down. Working away at it now, the passion lost in the downpour. Waking she was aware of dreaming of a time before she was born. Remembering at last how to enter her life. How it was done the first time. Pushing in the dark, in through the walls of the house. Coming into the room where the woman lay sweating, about to give birth. Pushing into her like a dandelion breaking through concrete. Like grass through a driveway, like grass anywhere.

A small sigh, a hard thought, enters

In the end, she is left with the rain falling in the street outside her house—the heavy, staccato fists beating the dust. She is left sitting in the dark staring at the backs of her hands, at the blue veins in her hands that have started to look so old, like her mother's. Somewhere a spirit empties itself of what it loves. The rain falls with a sound like a garbage bag with the bottom ripping out, everything splashing down. She is sitting with an emptied heart waiting to fill up with what is left. Rain making the sound things make on their way out, a sound like poverty, dysentery, like something that will hull you. The man downstairs is beating his dog. The woman was once an infant the weight of a small rock, and she has grown into this: the dog yelps, and she does nothing. The dog howls, making the sound of the dawning of knowledge that is not understood. The woman opens her mouth and a small sigh, a hard thought, enters. She hears the smack and howl of the man and his dog and she hears the storm. Waits until the noises stop, praying for courage. Instead she finds the place it belongs in her heart and has left her, the shape like a small hand clutching a thumb.

Assertions of likeness

1.

Flash of a white-tail, winter light

I stood there and watched him scrape the hide of the deer
he had found dead in the woods. It hung
inside out, from two-by-six,
in our garage

blood, muscle, tissue, leaves.

Newspaper to collect the drips. His arms
up to his elbows in yellow dish gloves,
blood on his wool socks.

2.

I stayed until I had watched him separate
the bullet hole from the body.
He lifted the deer's inner layer
like a surgeon lifts a face
to smooth the wrinkles,
diminish age.

I wanted, very badly, to see what was beneath
the hole, perfectly round; it looked
for all the world like a valve in a human heart.

I was tempted to put my finger in.

3.

He lifted the wound from itself
so I could see.

The hide stretched over a plank of wood
in our garage: it made no sense.
It was the first time I had tried to approach
whatever this is,

newspaper catching the drips, [no stanza break]

clots of black that I could draw out
with the point of a knife—I forgot to mention,
I picked it up, blood on the handle,

I forgot to say the blood, surprisingly red,
the deer, days dead.

4.

The hide hung like canvas,
like something avant garde.
There were leaves, native species,
stuck into the pigment.

It was beautiful. The exposed skin
shiny and grey like a tongue.

5.

To clean his knife, he wiped it
on a patch of hide he wasn't working on yet.
It looked *for all the world* like he was mixing paint.

A smear of pink fat, fresh blood—a palette knife.

Made me think how primal
art is, that it's got something to do
with blood on our hands.

6.

The deer was inside out, slung over two-by-six in our garage.

He lifted the wound so I could see it,
a wound of entry: defined edge.

There was more blood underneath.

The bullet must have ricocheted, its path
becoming crooked. [no stanza break]

The exit wound so jagged

it could have been torn in, by a branch.

7.

All the muscle was gone when he found it—

it: the head, limbs, two lumps like fat
with a pipe sticking out
that turned out to be
lungs; a bit of liver.

The hide discarded in the leaves.

8.

He folded it like a sheet, insides together.

All they left behind was a decision about worth
he wanted to reverse.

As for my part, when I opened the rubber bin,
I saw a puzzle,

a deer curled up
like a blanket.

I put my hand on its back.
It felt like the dog's back.

9.

Understanding is agile—
a white-tail in willow scrub, it leaps over what it can't

get through.

[section break]

10.

Scraping away at the hide is his way
of figuring this mess out. Mine's this.

There's a logic to which way muscle tears,

which way to pull it, like wallpaper,
so each effort goes as far as it can.

What if I write a line, follow it in, what if
the line tears what I didn't mean to open?

11.

I've got a huge bag of salt in the pantry, for preserving.
He wants to use it to sprinkle the cleaned skin.

He'll dissolve the rest in water, press
the deer's matted coat into solution.

12.

Trying to figure out
how to do this, he's read
that the stiff mat of hair that emerges days later

must be broken, the fibers
mechanically, methodically
destroyed.

That the Inuit used to do this
with their teeth. Found the best way was taking
the skin into their mouths.

13.

We'd never do this—that makes me
wonder how far from death
we think we are.

[stanza break]

I could see what was missing
the moment I opened the lid.

14.

I would not, for all the world,
miss out on this.

I would not, in regard to,
or taking into consideration,
everything in the world—

15.

He wanted to turn it into something worth keeping.

I wanted to learn how the mind
turns itself like a coat,
inside out,

to hold for a moment
the incomparable

unthinkable likeness

16.

of a thought,
        on its way to understanding—

VI.

The Ascension

I was given object lessons. Shown how oil and water will not mix.
This was to teach the separation from the body. Slick of motor oil, the water's stained

skin. I tried it for myself: shook and shook, so hard I developed stigmata—
cracks in my palms where the skin became a desert, cracked clay.

Christ walked on water to prove faith too is about density.
About what can be held within the body. Knowledge is heavy.

So the balance can be tipped in anyone's favour, like salt in a glass
settling toward the bottom. Substances that are more dense will sink beneath those

that are less. Oil always makes its way to the surface of the water.
A barge, though heavy, floats in the dull grey harbour.

Yesterday I found a grebe drenched in oil, skim of sand and foam. Dead on the shore.
Faith and doubt—like evaporation, condensation. Each occurs at the other's

threshold. Christ, at the end of his life, was heavier than he'd ever been.
He hung from his hands until he died, denser than air. How much

difficult knowledge can a body hold? Because substances that are more dense
sink beneath those that are less. After the crucifixion, Christ rises.

He makes his way to the surface. This is his destiny. Ascending
above the multitude, he achieves his immortality. But then the crowd goes home.

He has been changed by love. His needs have grown too human.
Alone, he reaches the upper atmosphere, which is cold and thin.

No one hears his miracle fail him. But there is a cry, *Eloi.*
As he falls, the oil that can't be washed anoints his body.

The Fine Thinking

This is not the fine thinking—
this trudging through
grass as tall as I am—
heavy boots
pinning the nettle
to the side

The fine thinking is not this
shovel sunk in clay,
not the leverage
of the muscle,
not the hard work
of clearing the roots,
live aspen, from the ground

No—the fine thinking
is this leaf caught
in the crowns of the horsetail
by the lake—
their dried out stalks,
thin wooden flutes—
the fine thinking
is this wind
that lifts the roots
of my hair
at the scalp,
that makes the marsh grass
dance,
then bow down.

October

Month of quicknesses,
of salt
songs in the belly
of ferment,
the small
mind of the leaves
retrieving
what it can
from the grass

Us too—
Just shiver,
and someone
you love
is lost,
shiver again,
and so
are you.

Spirit soul and body

So the day comes—
and I am moved from the garden
to a small ledge near an east window

placed
like a plant in a new pot,
the spirit in the body.

The day comes white and erases: doubt, reasons,

leaves winter, a snowsuit,
unzipped
and entered by a child
(I came out different each time)

body around the spirit.

A plaster cast, that body,

after summer's hairline fractures
never felt the pain till I stopped running.

What we didn't do on time

Loss, the lilac shrub unpruned. Watch it give the light
arthritic fists. The clenched claws of seed
gone to scars, like a branch
brought indoors.

Hold it broken in your hands, a stunned sparrow.

Remember this rustle the breeze brings
is not spring, only the tremble of the newly born,
a desire to return to the not-yet-conceived—
to be dream without hope, to be hope
that lacks consistency.

All this. And not yet winter.

Always the futility of what is asked.
Bark, dry grass. Take this for what it is.
Flawed gesture of willow, its split eyelids,
fresh buds; it offers this glimpse.
New-hatched down as it peeks into the light.

Take back a memory of what comes next.

Warm sun. Skin dry in the shadow
of the snow's retreat. These days are a short-lived
truce. At last, there is room
for the unclenched heart.

And we've lost only what we didn't need—
isn't that the meaning
of these accidents?—we come through them

knowing more of what we are *not*,
not branches through air,
not the tangle of an old shrub against its season.

Lines get re-drawn here
between what yields and what won't root.

The more we lose, the more [no stanza break]

we become

what we are, which is less and less,

so there is time now
to prune the lilac shrub,
clip its burled wings. Time

to do the things we didn't do
on time, to find

something in the room I can't find.

Shapes of cars in snow

So in winter we stay inside
building a fire or looking out
at a sky with its curtains drawn—
a sky that calls it a day early
and asks nothing in return,
and we climb back into bodies
where we came from.
We're there in the early evenings now,
dwindling with our thoughts
into a shape like the slip of heat
rising from a candle. We're slipping into thoughts
we thought we'd never have
wanting hot soup and old age
and for our needs to decline into one or two
manageable questions like do we only take this
because we're made to, born mortal
so we don't have to choose?

Though the season won't last, we adjust
to living in our bodies. Though they won't last.
The shape of our thoughts is what's ours.
Like this power line hung with snow,
strung limp as a hose between poles

or the street with its cars
and its shapes of cars in snow.

Temperatures of comparative darkness

That ache for light. A hand in a wound
of the will to test faith. The thin ice
not to be walked out on:

(See these footprints disappearing
at the river's edge?) Here,

there is open water all winter.

Once I saw a shape
like a body on the ice

heard the sirens, saw constables
swarm the bridge on foot.

From where I stood

(I couldn't get a good look)

it might or might not have been
a body. Might have been

the dark draw of the ice
collecting absence,

those shadows

so practiced at becoming
what we fear most at the moment of looking.

VII.

Hinge

At Moss Lake, another January morning
rolls over, goes to sleep, like
a child turning in dream—sheer cloud
over sun, ten minutes more darkness,
last night's rain coats the branches.
Forgotten dreams. Trudge on
until the light wakes us,
boots on snow, heavy, limbs unused
to cold, the unthinking body
cooperates—muscle pulls tendon
pulls bone. A mechanism.
Tibia, the shut flute of the shin,
and *fibula*, a mute reproach.
Hoar on the branches, frozen rain.
Too late, the fire-retardant for last year's fire
sprayed on the remains—charcoal splints, charred
as limbs, as disaster—the caught pack of coyotes,
snow hare in her burrow, soft quick of spruce
and human mind, curled feral, asleep, a bed of burning moss.
Harpokrates, god of silence, lives here—this is his house,
of elk-nibbled rose shrubs, ash, and uniform heights,
thorned spikes, and the crystallized weight
of rain. This is his breath, sky blue,
on the singed white heads of spruce,
husks of fallen trees, bison hair
snagged in frost like an exact phrase
someone hears just before waking.

Corner of an eye, a fire. A January morning.
Twelve kilometre trail through snow
and charred shrubs. Suffering is
everywhere, a fire not put out
by silence. Trudge on until the light
wakes us, flick of wild flame,
and sudden pain in the *popliteus*,
small muscle at the back of the knee, the hinge
by which the world swings out, then in.

When winter comes, double back

i.
Something's broke, something
don't work right.
Already,
wind at the eaves

carrots sweet with frost.
No one's listening.

ii.
Birdseed scattered in the grass.
Each death a house.
We go indoors
and the rain falls down,

the darkness drowns.

i.
Pour a belt of whiskey.
Blue jays
on the roof

misunderstand, this sadness.
Wind lets go of the eaves.

Something's broke, dead.

ii.
First the sun sets, then moon.
Without the light,
what will I do?

Like I said, there's steam
on windows, breath, inside panes.

i.
Whiskey.
Drink it down.

What you thought you wanted
you can't have.

What you thought
you could have done.

ii.
Something's broke like a heart,
an engine-block.
Anticipation. The frost-killed crops.

Something won't go without a fight.

i.
Winter, the predator, smells blood.
The snow hare
changes colour

beneath the hedge, disappointment.

ii.
What makes you stay here, lost—
what disorients
Weren't we just here,
fixing what's broke?

The house full of things
and their ghosts.

i.
Outside, the sidewalks, scraped bone.

Don't think you can
bring back your ghosts.

Each death's a house.

ii.
How many times did Mom say it?
If we don't leave soon
we're going to meet ourselves

coming home.

i.
Did you think waiting would bring you
around again? I mean me,

I mean

that fulcrum
where we meet, a hinge,

my sisters

ii.
Breath on the pane. The frost-killed crops.
It's the nature of return, a circle—

double back
approach

the point—
the bend

that just about breaks us.

If you stand still

Back to this light, the light that sustains you. The light that offers you a hope you can't refuse. Ordinary evening light, filtering through ash leaves. The light that resides with the sparrows chatting in the hedge. The light that oversimplifies everything, uses the same name for everything it calls out to. The light that trails slowly down the front steps like a child sneaking out of the house. The light that I know is all over the park right now, all over the sidewalks, while I'm on the couch, elbows on knees, wasting it. The light is temporary. You can walk into it sometimes, on a trail in the mountains and stand with its heat on your face, or move on. There are no decisions that need to be made when that light is on your bare feet or shoulders. Whether you're smoking or whether you've finally quit. Whether you know or have forgotten what *eros* in the world bears your face. Whosoever you believe in. Whithersoever you've been. Regardless of whether you've learned to play those opening bars of *Moonlight Sonata* that you've been practicing since last summer, though less often than you should. The light will find you, if you stand still. Remember how as a child your parents told you if you got lost to stay in one place and they'd find you? You must. You must remember that kind of faith.

Breathing in the northern forest

A few degrees below zero. The after-midnight sky lit by fluorescent moons the colour of weak tea. Driving home, you saw aurora break the hasp of night over the river and slide like a hand between two buttons. *There*, you said, steering down the road. I caught a glimpse. This was the first time in months I'd felt that twist at the back of the neck that comes to dissolve longing: how I'd been waiting for this, what is needed revealing itself only at the precise moment it arrives. All winter, pigeons on the wire. Then one day, they make you weep. Recognizing this, not as sadness but as what in us breeds hope: aurora, a breath down a shirt when the air is too cold, when we are warmed only by what we can expel. Pull over. This is my old neighbourhood. Your hand at the back of my neck, *hey, over here*, and aurora, a breath beneath ribs, leaking through. The punctate lesions where the eyes fail, perceiving darkness. The colour green before it is born. Marionette strings in the dark, practicing *dancing*. Our chins tipped to the sky, awake-eyed, mouths held still as boreal cup-fungus. As if we could draw the light down here with our heaviness. I see you in the north glow, trace of the vanished boreal. Surrounded with absence of the forest you love. The love you taught me—*white-throat, coral root*. I've loved you back for four migrations through the sun. Now these lights teach volatility, the shifting of valences, the awful possibility of wanting more. A snowflake falls on your shoulder and melts, and is attached by nothing. These are the ghosts that tug at our wrists. These are the shed moments the day couldn't use, come back to tell us about weight, about how to exchange what we don't want for what wants us—particles for light. Sun-flares for the marionette strings that practice *dancing*. This must be how we first became spirit. This light in the north, bone-bare and drunk on wind. Breathing, even when no one is looking.

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